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A Library Without Books: The Importance of Language Representation in Public Libraries

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A Library without Books: The Importance of Language Representation in Public Libraries

University Honors Program Thesis/Capstone

Submitted by:

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May 2020

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Abstract:

The focus of this project is to assess the degree of access to Spanish-language books in the Omaha Public Library system. After constructing a map of all Omaha Public Libraries using Global Information System (GIS) and analyzing the population around those areas, I cross-referenced individual library catalogs to compare raw numbers of English-language books to non-English and specifically Spanish-language books. The ultimate finding of this project is that even though approximately 10% of Omaha citizens included in the census speak Spanish as their primary language, Spanish-language books make up only 2% of the total books across all Omaha Public Libraries. Considering the population of individuals who come from a bilingual household or those trying to learn Spanish draws an even more drastic deficit in groups who would be benefitted by a more comprehensive collection of Spanish-language books. The Omaha Public Libraries, while a valued and important community service, could be doing more to serve its entire community rather than focusing so wholly on the majority. Access to books in Spanish would be hugely valuable to Spanish-speakers as well as Spanish-learners. In order to make the library collection more reflective of its community, we Omaha residents should go to their local libraries and request Spanish language books.

Author's Note and Significance Statement:

Through the course of my own second-language acquisition journey, I have had the opportunity to explore various methods of second language exposure and enrichment. When I first started learning Spanish, I lived in a small, rural town with limited resources for language education. I went to a school an hour and a half away and had the opportunity to be exposed to a more diverse foreign language program. However, the lack of Spanish education resources in my small town, also contributed to a subpar offering of Spanish-speaker support, such as translating services. As such, with minimal formal Spanish education and an arguably rudimentary skill set, I relied on other resources to increase my Spanish-speaking aptitude so I could assist with Spanish translating in my small town. In addition to the importance of incorporating auditory and oral comprehension challenges early on in my foreign language education, access to books written in Spanish was hugely helpful to increasing my vocabulary and helping me to be more comfortable with a diversity of registers and varieties of Spanish. I was fortunate to attend a school with a collection of non-English books, but those books were almost two hours away and not accessible to the majority of community members from my town.

While tutoring a local high school student in Spanish, I discovered that my current local library does not have Spanish-language books. I intend to establish that reading in a second language can greatly facilitate and accelerate language acquisition through independent or facilitated second language education. My objective for this project is to highlight the lack of access to Spanish-language books within the Omaha Public Library system.

Introduction:

Learning a second language, especially when starting later in life, can be a difficult task. However, the benefits of functional bilingualism are innumerable. Bilingualism is shown to increase empathy in children and adults by increasing their ability to “perspective-take”, or put themselves in another person's situation to better understand their worldview and behavior (Javor, 2016). In addition to benefiting interpersonal skills and relationship building by allowing greater empathy, bilingualism is demonstrated to enhance “executive control” (Bialystok, 2011). Executive control refers to the higher processing that allows for goal-oriented behavior including focussing, problem-solving, and planning (Javor, 2016). The effects of speaking multiple languages have been well-documented and even go so far as to suggest that regularly speaking and operating in greater than one language can have extensive benefits on neurobiological and psychological aspects of health. .

Just as parents are encouraged to read to young children to aid language acquisition in their primary language, reading or being read to in another language has been demonstrated to be an effective language acquisition tool. A study of learning in preschool students raised in Hmong or Spanish-speaking homes while attending an English-dominant school demonstrated that reading to a child in their primary language at home helped to increase their vocabulary acquisition in both languages when they were read the English-language versions of those books at school (Roberts, 2008). Roberts’s study included 2 copies of the same book, one in English and the other in the child’s primary language (the language spoken in their household). Not only does this experimental design allow parents to participate in their child’s education regardless of

their English-capabilities, it demonstrates that reading in a non-English language improves both English and non-English functionality.

The role of reading in learning a second language extends beyond initial language acquisition in children. Whether learning a language for the first time or honing skills, reading has been demonstrated to confer a better understanding of the grammatical and practical nuances of a language leading to greater mastery. In a 1997 study, College students enrolled in an intermediate French course reported that they found independent reading, both for pleasure and school assignment, was more helpful for learning grammar than direct grammar instruction (Dupuy). Similarly, a study of beginner German students found that having students engage in “community reading” activities to read and interpret complex texts, such as an authentic German romance, demonstrated better decoding skills, grammar knowledge, and vocabulary than students who received a traditional education approach (not including extensive reading) (Mull, 2002).

A key element of each of these examples is access to books in a second language. Whether studying French, German, Hmong, English, or Spanish, the resources available in the target language influence the ability to make progress in any language acquisition process. While schools are an important resource for language education, the benefits of bilingualism ought to be available to adult learners or any individual not attending schools. As such, libraries expand the reach of the community so that all members have equal access.

Libraries also introduce an element of self-agency in which students and non-students alike can select texts that interest them. When discussing the execution of extensive reading curriculums, Day and Bamford established ten metrics for highest efficacy (2002).

1. The reading material is easy
2. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics is available.
3. Learners choose what they want to read.
4. Learners read as much as possible.
5. Reading is for pleasure, and to gain information and general understanding.
6. Reading is the reward itself.
7. Learners generally read quickly and not slowly.
8. Reading is silent and individual.
9. Teachers orientate and provide guidance to students.
10. The teacher models being a reader.

While Day and Bramford published these guidelines as a tool for teachers, their execution can more or less be achieved independently. Especially for the first 6 guidelines, access to target-language books- and not just 2 or 3 random books- at the local library is paramount to ensure equal opportunity to all community members.

Looking at Omaha specifically, this project will compare the proportion of Spanish speakers to English speakers within the city of Omaha to the proportion of Spanish-language books available at Omaha Public Libraries. While this project will focus mainly on native Spanish speakers or heritage speakers, the conclusion of this project is that all community members would be benefitted by access to non-English books at the public library.

Methods:

Global Information System Mapping In order to identify the Omaha Public Libraries and their relative locations within the city of Omaha, Global Information System Mapping (GIS) was used. Using GIS, a layout of the city of Omaha was first generated and then all public facilities were highlighted. From this, the results were further refined by filtering out fire stations, post offices, and other locations not relevant to the scope of this study. The locations of the libraries were then cross-referenced to each individual library's address to ensure accuracy. After the locations were verified, the resulting map was used as a reference to depict the geographical distribution of each library within the Omaha Public Library system.

United States Census Information All information regarding languages spoken within Omaha was retrieved from the United State Census. To do this, the United States Census website was used. In order to focus the results, advanced search and specific filtering was used to narrow the scope of the data to an appropriate and reflective range. To specify geographic region, the results were filtered to Omaha Urban Area and Omaha, Nebraska using the Geography filter. Then, results were filtered by target information. The Topics filter was used to isolate Populations and People. Within Populations and People, Language Spoken at Home was selected. After the results were sufficiently focused, the percentage of Spanish-speaking households and other relevant data was recorded as reported.

Omaha Public Library Catalog All book data was self reported by the Omaha Public Library system in their online catalogs. Filters were used to specify the data, but all numbers were self-reported and not verified by a member of this project. The Omaha Public Library

online catalog is readily accessible via the internet. Neither a library card nor proof of address is necessary to view the online catalog. The same filters were used for each individual library collection. The catalog was accessed online and then Advanced Search was used to filter the results. Under the “Language” tab, Spanish was selected. To specify the branch, the targeted branch was selected under “Held at.” Under “Format”, only “books” was selected. For all searches, the “construct your query” form was used. Keywords, available at, audience, reading level, collection, content, date published and all other format options (besides books), were left blank. When these filters were applied and the results for an individual library were generated, more specific filters were applied to further refine the results. For each individual collection, “Books” was selected under format and Spanish was selected under language. Once the results were filtered, total book count as reported by the results was recorded. Additionally, the catalog divided the results by content into three categories: fiction, nonfiction, and undetermined. Each of the three subtotals was also recorded, government documents were excluded if present. In order to record the total number of books (Spanish, English, and other languages), the above protocol was repeated, but all language specifications were changed to “Any.” The same filtering methods were used for each of the 12 Omaha Public Library branches and data was recorded for each collection.

Results:

Figure 1: GIS Map of Omaha Public Library

Each Omaha Public Library location is labelled on the map above. Relative distance as well as nearby streets and land features are included to indicate proximity and location.

Language Spoken in the Home- Douglas County

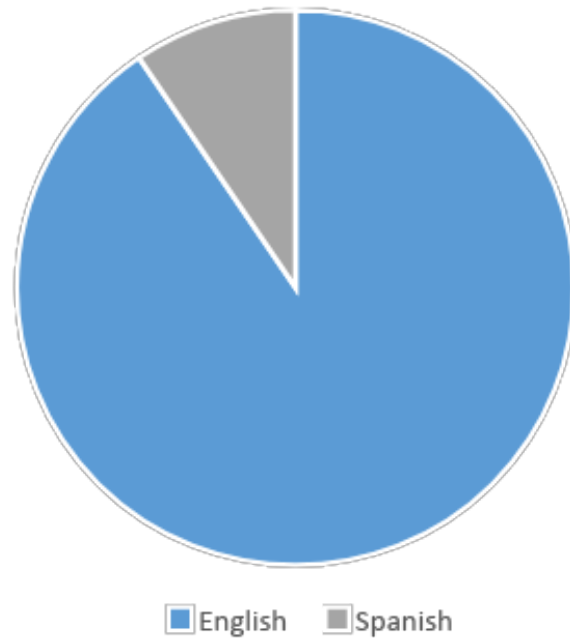


Figure 2: Language Spoken in Home

This figure indicates the percentage of households in Douglas county that indicate Spanish as their primary language spoken at home. 10.3% of Omaha households speak Spanish as the primary language at home.

Table 1: Household Language in Omaha

Primary Household Language	Estimate Total	Estimate Percentage
English	364,237	84%
Spanish	44,751	10.3%
Language other than English and Spanish	24,768	6%

Table 2: English Fluency in Non-English Households

English Fluency in Non-English households	Estimate Total	Estimate Percentage
Speak English Very Well	43,126	55.8%
Speak English Less than Very Well	34,147	44.2%

Table 3. Spanish Speakers by Age

Spanish speakers by age	Estimate Total	Estimate Percentage
5 to 17 years old	11,799	2.70%
18 to 64 years old	31,297	7.20%
65 years old and over	1,655	0.40%

English Fluency in Non-English-speaking Households

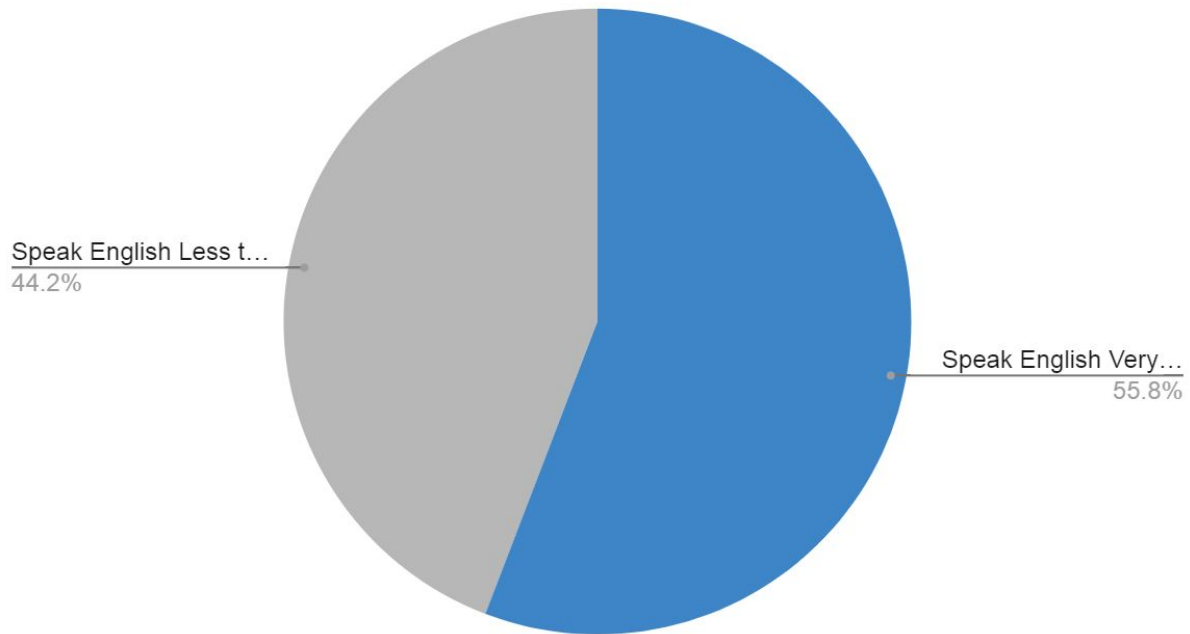


Figure 3: Degree of English Fluency in Spanish-speaking Homes Data gathered from the US census information of the Omaha urban area. The results were divided into the categories of “Speak English Less than Very Well” and “Speak English Very Well.”

Spanish Speakers by Age

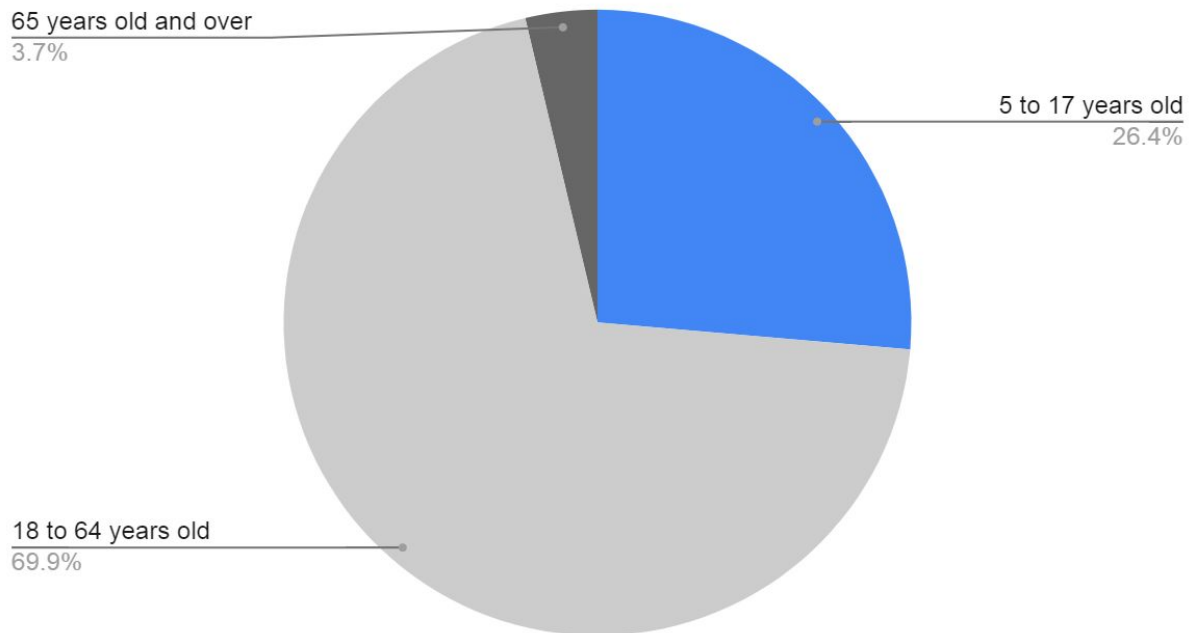


Figure 4: Spanish Speakers by Age Group Data gathered from the US Census to identify division of Omaha Spanish speakers by age group.

Omaha Public Library Book Collection by Language

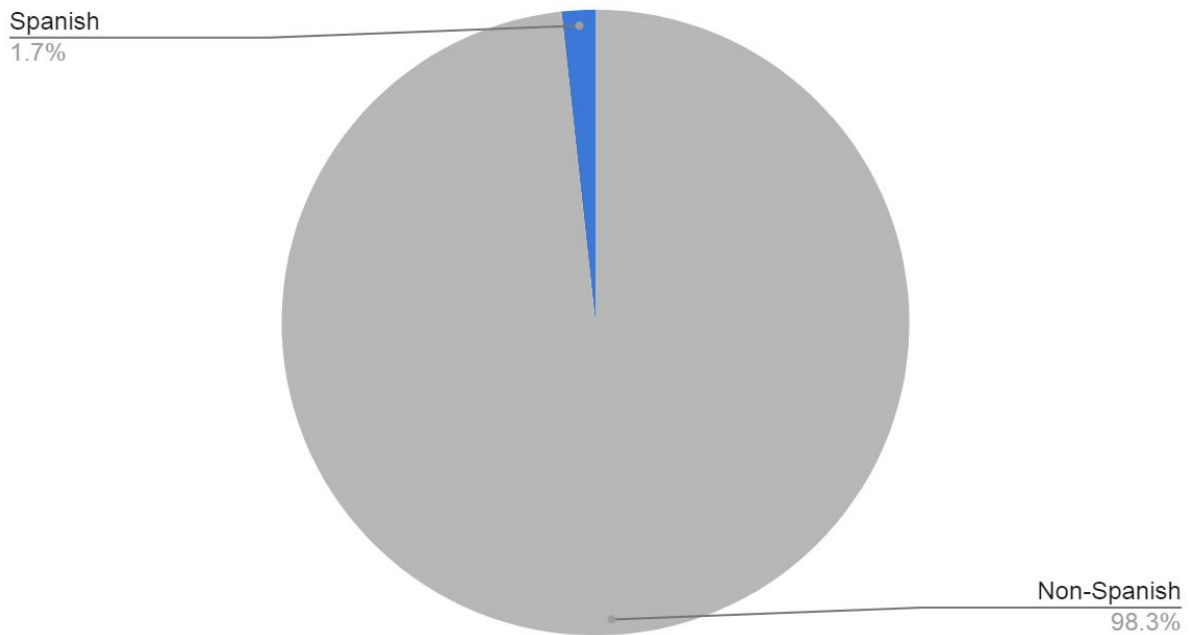


Figure 5. Omaha Public Library Book Collection by Language

All data was gathered from the Omaha Public Library catalog as described. While Spanish is the second most widely represented language by a significant amount, Total Books (blue) includes non-Spanish and non-English results as well. Total Books (all languages) sums to 820,928.

Total Books (Spanish) sums to 14,462.

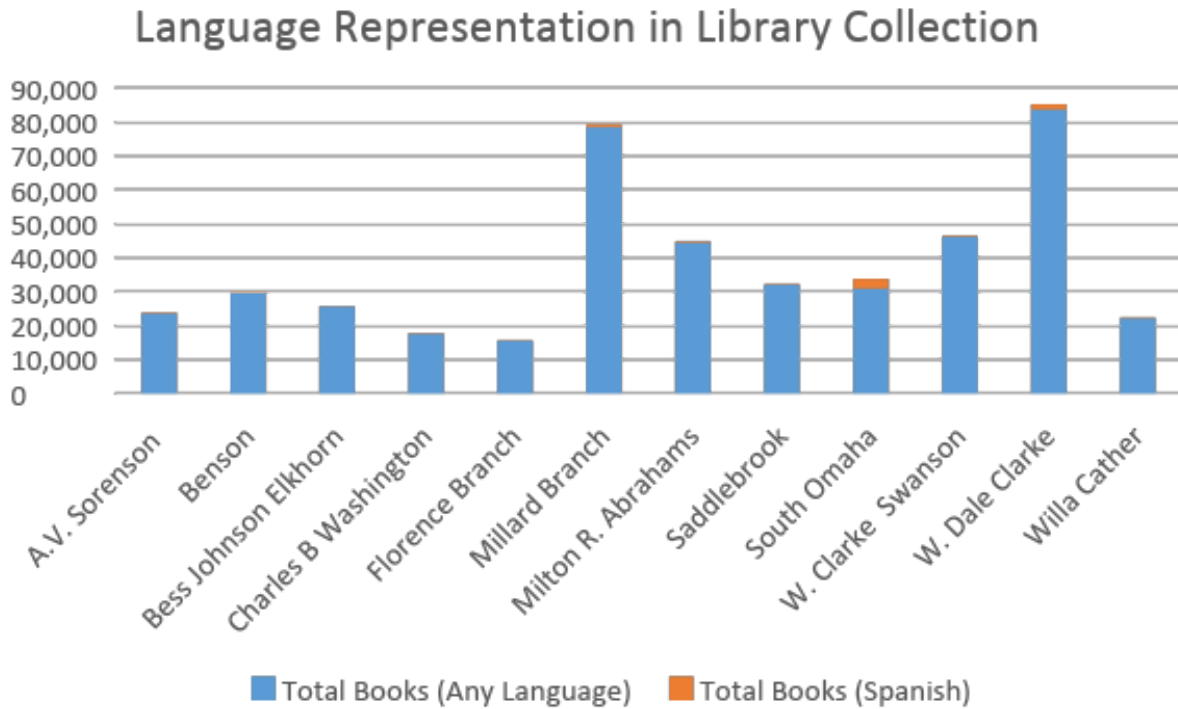


Figure 6: Language Representation in Library Collection Division of book collection by language for each branch of the Omaha Public Library System. Book language and numbers were recorded from the Omaha Public Library catalog.

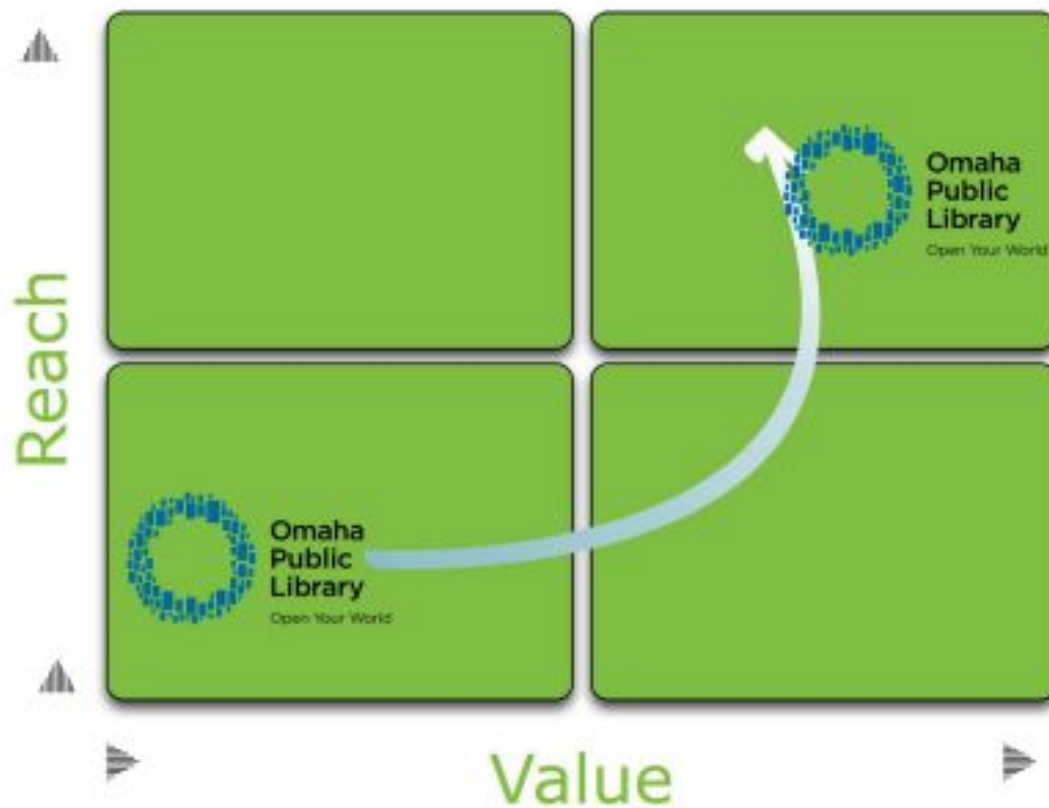


Figure 7: Optimizing Reach and Value in Omaha Public Libraries This figure featured in Omaha Public Library Strategic Plan demonstrates the ambition of OPL to expand their reach and increase the value of their material.

Discussion:

According to the U.S. Census report of the Omaha urban area, approximately 10% of Omaha households report Spanish as the primary language spoken at home (Figure 2). Within that 10%, approximately 45% speak English less than very well (Table 2). While the census does not indicate the percentage of English-speakers who speak Spanish less than very well, the inclusion of Spanish books in the OPL collections would benefit Spanish-learners and English-learners. As referenced in Roberts's study about early bilingual education, reading in both the native language and target language can increase mastery of both (2008).

Within the self-identified Spanish speaking population, approximately 75% are outside school-aged range (5-17). As such, even if one were to argue that public schools can independently execute foreign language education, the schools reach less than a quarter of the Spanish speaking population. The remaining three quarters are community members who need to shop, work, attend doctor's appointments and perform all other sorts of daily tasks in a predominantly English-speaking city. The extensive bio-psycho-social benefits of bilingualism were established earlier in this project, and apply to English learners and Spanish learners alike. In addition to facilitating daily tasks for Spanish speakers in Omaha, functionality in both Spanish and English can facilitate relationship building, enrich a resume, and improve cognitive skills. Even if school-aged children have options other than public libraries, many other community members do not have access to those same resources.

Despite Spanish speakers making up approximately 10% of Omaha's population, Spanish-language books make up only 1.7% on average across all OPL collections (Fig.5). Remarkably, 1.7% is artificially skewed higher by a 9% mode in the South Omaha branch, and

several branches had so insignificant a proportion of Spanish-language books that they made up less than 1% of the collection (Fig 6.).

Community engagement and equal and inclusive access are listed among the Omaha Public Library System's core values. Omaha Public Libraries have an expressed commitment to offering the highest value materials to the greatest number of people (Fig.7). The purpose of this project is not to suggest that OPL is anything less than dedicated to serving its community, but rather to highlight an opportunity for OPL to serve its community even better. Even if someone were to suggest that the Spanish speakers make up too small a proportion of the community to garner diversification of the library collection, the OPL strategic plan cites a marketing strategy, "The Long Tail Strategy" in which niche interests are targeted and produce the same amount of engagement and outreach as broad interests (2011). The OPL strategic plan states,

The Long Reach strategy is an extension of the strategy OPL has always used, albeit without the market segmentation technology and a process for both retaining existing and creating new patrons. In achieving a Long Reach, OPL is essentially introducing an individual or small group to the Library, capturing their interest, and amazing them with the service and expertise provided. Implementing the Long Reach strategy will make it easier to find non-cardholders, engage them in their areas of interest, and create another patron and Library advocate.

I would not readily argue that the 45,000 Spanish-speakers is an "insignificant" population, but according to the Long Reach strategy, even niche populations are an important aspect of optimized outreach.

The most effective strategy to increase the number of Spanish-language books offered through the Omaha Public Library system is a grassroots awareness and advocacy campaign. All library card holders should request more Spanish language books be offered at their local library. Patron request is a highly effective method of communicating community needs to the libraries. A more representative collection would provide the opportunity to use extensive reading as a language learning strategy. Spanish-language books would offer the opportunity to improve language mastery for Spanish-learners and English-learners as well as provide exposure to different cultures or texts that may not either be available. This project ultimately concludes that individual requests for Spanish language books would help to decrease the disparity in the Omaha Public Library collection. These steps would be effective because library collections are based on community desire and perceived need.

Future Directions:

To continue this project, the availability of Spanish-language books in online collections could be assessed. Digital collections such as Overdrive could potentially offer more Spanish-language texts. However, the efficacy of digital collections could be potentially limited by access to the internet or digital reading devices. While the census data presented here demonstrates that there is a genuine need within the community for Spanish-language books, a myriad of cultural and social barriers could be interfering with visibility. Discussing those barriers is outside the scope of this paper, but would be a helpful study for the future. Libraries are an integral institution within the community and the services they offer are an invaluable asset. It is important to establish that the findings discussed in this paper are not critical of the

Omaha Public Library system but are intended to highlight another way in which they can serve the community.

In addition to library collection analysis, a more in depth survey of the Spanish speaking demographics in Omaha would provide further significance to this project. I would recommend an analysis of Omaha demographic changes to demonstrate a sustained or increasing need.

Additionally, GIS could be used to create zones based on zip codes surrounding the libraries; from this information, individual library collections could be compared to a more specific demographic area.

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